US relaxes visa rules for foreign scholars

By Christopher Grimes in New York

The State Department on Friday eased a tough visa requirement for foreign science and engineering students that had been labeled the biggest obstacle to attracting the world's most promising scholars to the US.

The surprise move extends the validity of science-related visas to four years, ending the need to re-applying each year. This makes it easier for visiting students and researchers to travel to academic conferences outside the US or to make family visits.

Academics and business leaders have warned that the US risked losing its position as the top destination for promising international students with its onerous visa process. Microsoft's Bill Gates and General Electric's Jeffrey Immelt have added their voices to warnings that tighter visa controls introduced after the September 11 attacks were harming the US's economic interests.

On Friday Nils Hasselmo, president of the Association of American Universities and a leading critic of the visa controls, said the new policy "sends the right kind of message" to students considering US research universities.

"It's a commonsense reform that removes an unnecessary burden that caused enormous inconvenience for thousands of international students and discouraged many more from coming here to study," he said.

Students and researchers working in "sensitive" scientific and technical areas had been required to obtain a special visa, known as a Visa Mantis, each year. The measure was meant to screen against the illegal transfer of technology. But several students were reported to have been stranded overseas for months after leaving the US to travel.